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ABSTRACT

Arguing that complaints are inevitable and that complaint handling should be an integral part of the library's public service program, this paper identifies and discusses the components of such a program. Concerns discussed are those that should be of general interest to all types of libraries, and the primary focus is on external complaints, i.e., those made by library users or others not employed by the library. The paper comprises the following sections: (1) Introduction; (2) The Problem; (3) Management Commitment; (4) The Policy Statement; (5) The Procedure; (6) Complaint Receipt and Initial Response; (7) Formalization of the Complaint; (8) Receipt of the Written Complaint; (9) Initiation of Fact Finding; (10) The Fact-Finding Report; (11) Patron Response and Appeal; (12) The Problem Patron; (13) Conclusion; (14) Acknowledgements; (15) References; and (16) Vita. (THC)

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Complaint Handling in the Library

by

William C. Robinson

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INTRODUCTION

Complaints are inevitable. "No matter how hard you try, sooner or later you're going to foul up."[1] No library can provide service without making an occasional error. Even if error-free service could be provided, human nature is such that some patrons would still complain. And patrons may err, misinterpret and foul up too.

This paper suggests that complaint handling should be an integral part of the library's public service program. It also identifies and discusses the components of an effective complaint-handling program. While complaint-handling particulars may vary by type of library, this paper will discuss those concerns which should be of general interest.

Complaints may be internal or external. Internal complaints are made by personnel associated with the library in some staff capacity; for example, a clerk feels that she has too much to do or her office area is too cold. Internal complaint handling is part of personnel management. External complaints are made by library users or others not employed by the library. Although much of what is included in this paper could apply to both types of complaint handling, the focus is on external complaints.

At a time when so many libraries are threatened with substantial reductions in funding, initiatives are needed to increase patron satisfaction and to increase the number of library supporters in the community. Dingwall's finding that dissatisfied customers tell four times as many people about their experience as do satisfied customers suggests that development of an effective, efficient complaint-handling program is crucial.[2]

THE PROBLEM

Opportunities for complaint are legion. The collection inevitably contains an item which offends someone or does not contain an item wanted by another. Staff are not always jolly, empathetic, attractive, and competent. The building may be too warm or too cool. Restrooms may be dirty and furniture unattractive and uncomfortable. Patrons and staff may be too noisy for those who value quiet. One could go on, but it is evident that most libraries are full of complaint possibilities.

Inadequately resolved complaints may cause several undesirable results. Some patrons will stop using the library, which Hirschman calls the exit option. For example, exits might be reflected in circulation decline. The

other option, that of voice, is to express dissatisfaction in an attempt to change things.[3] Unhappy patrons relate their experiences to friends, other agencies, prominent individuals, and the like. A negative image can quickly be established, one which is most difficult to remove.[4] When the exit option is limited, patrons are more likely to complain. When patrons believe that voice will be effective, they will postpone exit.[5] The library which hopes to attract and retain patrons should reduce the cost and increase the rewards of using the voice option.

No librarian or library staff member should be surprised by a complaint. Nor should the librarian personalize the complaint so that each negative comment about library service inevitably becomes a personal indictment of the librarian. The complaint, regardless of source or subject, should be seen as a normal part of providing a complex, sophisticated and expensive service to the public.

If it is normal to complain, and even the most amateur observer of human behavior must recognize that complaining is virtually an American pastime, then it must be normal to receive complaints. To provide for the communication of opinion is not an admission of failure, guilt, error, or incompetency, but rather a recognition that complaints are inevitable; the librarian must be prepared to deal with complaints thoughtfully and with due process. To ignore a complaint, to have one handled one way and a similar complaint another way, to become emotionally overwhelmed and too personally involved with a complaint—all these are manifestations of an unpreparedness that has no place in any profession, least of all in a service profession.

Not only are complaints inevitable, but patrons have a right to complain. Both the library and librarian exist to meet the wants and needs of particular communities. We work in their libraries, and we develop collections and services for their use. They certainly have the right to communicate their satisfaction and dissatisfaction. As professionals we should respect this right to be heard and ensure that that right is a meaningful one.

Moreover, at a time when evaluation and needs assessment are increasingly popular and needed management tools, complaints can be a powerful analytical tool for capturing user feedback on the quality and the utility of the various services provided. As Andreasen says: "Business and non-profit organizations need measures of how well products and services are meeting client needs and wants so that these organizations can enhance their own and their clients' well-being."[6] Best agrees: "If consumers are encouraged to speak up about problems, and if careful use is made of the information

they provide by complaining, the quality of products and services will improve and there will thus be fewer occasions for buyers to register complaints."[7]

There are several measures of patron satisfaction and dissatisfaction. The complaint is the best known measure of dissatisfaction. The major purpose of a complaint-handling program is not to discover whether the patron or the library is at fault, but rather to identify the cause of dissatisfaction and then to eliminate that cause. Gellhorn indicates that in complaint handling "as in personal health, prevention is far more important than cure."[8]

Many complaints about library services are based on unrealistic expectations. Unrealistic expectations may be caused by patron ignorance or by librarians who promise too much for a product or service.[9] For example, in overcoming patron resistance to or ignorance of high technology in libraries, librarians may be simplistic and create the impression that the library of the future has arrived and that information-seeking will be far quicker and easier than it is. Whatever the cause, unrealistic expectations need to be overcome if dissatisfaction is to be minimized. When unrealistic expectations are identified and better understood by library staff, service adjustments can be made and appropriate educational and public relations initiatives may be undertaken. Thus, the complaint is an opportunity as well as a challenge.

But what if a library receives no complaints? Best states that nearly one out of every six purchases leads to an "unremedied consumer problem...."[10] This rate (17%) may not be valid for the library, but it does suggest that there should be complaints.

Most complaints are silent ones. To voice a complaint requires knowledge of the procedures, time, energy, belief that the complaint will make a difference, assertiveness, and no fear of retaliation. Some studies of complaints received by business indicate that for every complaint actually received, 10 to 15 are felt but not voiced.[11] This suggests that the library without a complaint is receiving more than its share of silent complaints—that there is a barrier of some sort which discourages patrons from voicing their feelings. For example, people may not complain because they believe that policies, procedures, service—whatever—cannot or will not be changed.[12] Many patrons have had consumer experiences that convince them that complaints have little effect. The library needs to demonstrate that complaints can make a difference.

The fact that a library receives complaints may indicate a healthy relationship with its patrons, one in which they feel comfortable in voicing their opinions and confident that their complaints will make a difference. Open door management—the assumption that if no one comes through the manager's open door, there are no problems—has long been discredited; similarly, the fact that a library has no complaints indicates a problem, not success. Every library should receive some complaints.

Some may argue that complaint handling is less important in the library than in business because patrons do not really buy products and services and because the library is a not-for-profit institution. Is it likely that patrons will have one standard for the retail business and a different one for the library? If they are less likely to complain in the library because of minimal expectations, that would seem to be a liability rather than an asset. While most patrons do not pay user fees directly, they do pay for and buy library services through their tax monies or other fees. Given the present economic climate and the negative attitude which many have toward publicly-funded agencies and their use of tax monies, complaint handling seems more important than ever before.

Several factors are likely to cause the number of complaints in libraries to increase.[13] One group of factors relates to consumer behavior in general. Consumers are better educated, more sophisticated and more demanding than they have been in the past. Products and services are increasingly complex and are more difficult to understand or use without guidance. Because of inflation, consumers are sorely pressed; they can afford less and are more concerned with the quality of what they buy. The higher cost of labor has meant more self-service in retail outlets, resulting in an impersonal marketplace and a greater burden on the consumer to make purchase decisions with minimal help. Because of many shared negative experiences, including those appearing in the media, consumers may be suspicious of organizations that provide products and services:

> Consumers encounter a variety of problems in the marketplace which have serious impact on their own self-image, their sense of their own capabilities and their confidence in themselves as effective actors and participants in the decisions affecting their daily lives. Too often today, their basic marketplace experience is one of frustration and, in some cases, outright injustice.[14]

Several studies of complaint handling in retail business have identified variables associated with voicing complaints. Complaints are likely when: (1) products or services are expensive or have dramatically increased in price, (2) the personal cost of a deficiency in the product or service is high,

(3) the service or product is important, (4) the person believes that he could have done nothing to prevent the problem, (5) the person is from a higher socioeconomic status, (6) the person is male, (7) the person is young and above average in education, (8) the person is assertive and outgoing, and (9) the person believes that his complaint is likely to be successful.[15] Some of the characteristics associated with voicing complaints are also those associated with library use. For example, younger age and education are good predictors of public library use.[16] Consumer behavior shaped in the marketplace will not be left behind when people come to the library. Those factors that tend to make consumers more assertive should also make library patrons more assertive.

Changes in the nature of library service are also likely to increase the number of complaints. Financial conditions in libraries have reduced collections, hours and services so that patrons' expectations are less likely to be met than in the past. Staff reductions mean that patrons find themselves in an increasingly self-service environment where there is less opportunity for library staff to assist and to explain. The more that libraries are pressed financially, the more likely that fees will be charged for providing some services, such as interlibrary loan or providing citations from machine-readable databases, and patrons who pay directly for services are more likely to complain when that service or product does not meet their expectations.

With less money available and increased external emphasis on operating efficiency, there is a risk that library managers may come to see patrons "as a nuisance, a constraint, and even a barrier to productivity."[17] This is likely where there is patron resistance to change in familiar environments and procedures. The increasing use of new technology, such as detection systems at exit points or electronic access to bibliographic records, is likely to be the occasion for snags and problems as well. Our personal negative experiences with automated record-keeping systems used by business and government should remind us that the implementation of new technology may be a rich source of complaint. Both staff and patrons often prefer the traditional library which seems more personal and comfortable. There can be considerable resistance to high technology in a tradition-laden field. At the same time, a greater awareness of information service options by a small but increasingly vocal and sophisticated user group—those with computer access and knowledge—may produce greater expectations of libraries, more disappointments and thus more complaints.

Given the likelihood that some library patrons will be dissatisfied and that complaints will be voiced, the library manager may select from two differ-

ent responses. The traditional response has been one of "ad hocism": complaints are dealt with as they appear, without planning and without any particular attempt to recognize that complaints are a regular, continuing part of providing service to the public. The fact that nothing is listed under "complaint," "complaint handling" or "customer service" in the last 20 years of library literature is one indication of a lack of interest in this subject. Is this an unpopular topic because writers or would-be writers fear judgment—as librarians avoid writing of unsuccessful programs? Or has the topic just escaped the notice of public service librarians and administrators? There are related subject headings which are used and articles can be found on use and user studies and public relations, for example. However, these broader topics tend to be more general and do not adequately focus on the satisfaction of the individual patron. They are also likely to be now and then initiatives while complaint handling should be an activity which continues to affect individual patrons on a daily basis. Specific evidence of dissatisfaction or satisfaction should be available in the literature so that appropriate norms can be developed and so that likely causes can be shared.

MANAGEMENT COMMITMENT

The single most important ingredient in creating an effective complaint handling program is management commitment. No staff member is likely to treat complaint handling seriously if it is known or believed that the director or associate director doesn't care. Too often, library management's announced commitment to user service and satisfaction is not matched by visible enthusiasm and involvement. When senior management demonstrates these characteristics to staff on a continuing basis, complaint handling is likely to be successful even where specific written policies and procedures are absent. Conversely, superior policies and procedures are not likely to make a difference if staff understand that management interest is only *pro forma*.

Management commitment begins by recognizing that maximizing patron satisfaction is the cornerstone of library service. Patrons are needed if libraries are to survive, and it is much easier to retain existing patrons than to develop new ones.[18] There are two ways to increase satisfaction: to improve the quality of the service and to improve complaint handling. Improving service quality eliminates the dissatisfactions which cause complaints. Improved complaint handling identifies problem areas to be corrected and helps to eliminate complaints in the future. This means that quality control is an essential part of handling complaints. As Lovelock

and Young indicate, developing patron trust "requires a long-term strategy, not a superficial, short-term program that is switched on and off like an electric light."[19] Each administrative, technical and public service activity should be designed to maximize patron satisfaction, given available resources. For-profit organizations often emphasize customer satisfaction by promising "satisfaction guaranteed." While libraries with their more limited funds may be unable to guarantee satisfaction they should be able to make it a more visible part of the library's mission.

Management interest or commitment may be measured by the recognition given patron satisfaction in policies and procedures and by management reaction to patron option. The manner in which the complaint is handled by managers, remarks made to colleagues and staff members, and the resolution of the complaint provide both a crucial measure of interest and a series of cues which are likely to be known throughout the library and imitated by staff at all levels. The manager represents a role model of considerable importance. In particular, the manager must challenge the frequently held belief that the complaining patron is an "enemy." Typically, this "enemy" mentality "begins with the assumption that the customer is wrong."[20] There should be no doubt among the staff that managers welcome complaints as an opportunity to identify and eliminate problems and that it is assumed that the customer is right until demonstrated otherwise.

There is a very real tension between loyalty to the patron and loyalty to the staff. Without explanation, tact and diplomacy, staff may feel that encouraging complaints can be achieved only at the cost of making staff vulnerable and morale may suffer. It is management's responsiblility to create a balanced program that protects patron rights and supports staff in their dealing with the public.

It may be easier and less elusive to attempt to identify and minimize particular incidents of dissatisfaction than to identify goals which allow satisfaction to be maximized.[21] Management which focuses on minimizing dissatisfaction will place particular emphasis on complaint handling.

In a library where there is management commitment, discussions of appropriate complaint handling techniques should be part of the orientation/training provided new staff members, both professional and nonprofessional, and should continue to receive emphasis in staff meetings afterward.

Complaint handling is also related to standards or minimum service requirements. Where performance standards exist, management can max-

imize patron satisfaction and have a frame of reference for dealing with dissatisfaction. Such business standards as item availability, order processing time, error rate, order timeliness, order completeness, and complaint ratio may be modified to suit the library. For example, it would be easier to respond to a complaint about how long it took to answer a reference question if there was a standard response time or a range of times, say for simple informational questions, and management knew how often this standard was met.[22] Customer service standards are based on the needs, wants and habits of patrons, and should provide an objective, operational measure of performance or cues for corrective action.[23] Different standards for different types of customers may be appropriate. Reasonable standards that are shared with the community can play an important role in creating realistic expectations. While satisfactory customer service standards are not yet a part of library management, some progress is being made. For example, *Output Measures for Public Libraries: A Manual of Standardized Procedures* by Douglas Zweizig and Eleanor Jo Rodger represents an important step in this direction.[24] Many for-profit organizations have discovered that they were attempting to provide higher (and perhaps more expensive) levels of service than the customers required.[25]

Finally, management commitment might be measured by the degree to which the library solicits reactions rather than merely reacting to unsolicited complaints. To search out complaints by actively ascertaining customer satisfaction is proactive complaint handling; responding to complaints received from dissatisfied patrons is reactive.[26] Libraries should encourage patrons to speak out when things go wrong. Proactive initiatives may range from a suggestion box to advertising, promotion at the circulation desk, book mark messages inserted in books as they are charged, or a detailed community or user survey. Some retail outlets, such as banks and supermarkets, have had success with brief report card forms which are distributed to customers and then returned directly to management.[27] Library-oriented modifications of two such forms appear in figures 1 and 2. Such forms are not difficult to create and use. They represent a simplified, economical, quick, and easy version of the more sophisticated user study which libraries use to evaluate service. While these forms typically solicit general comment rather than specific suggestions for improvement, they are valuable because they provide visible evidence to the community as well as to staff that patron comment is encouraged.

A complaint handling program places complaints within the larger public service context. LaLonde and Zinszer present a seven-stage service model: (1) a service audit identifies reasonable expectations of patrons, service levels in similar libraries, and local service levels; (2) appropriate service

Please check ONE answer in each of the following categories;

1. How often do you come into the library?	Weekly ( )	Twice a Month ( )	Once a Month ( )	Less Than Once a Month ( )	
2. How long have you used this library?	over 5 years ( )	2 - 5 years ( )	1 - 2 years ( )	under 1 year ( )	
3. How would you rate our staff on:		Very Good	Satis-factory	Poor	Not Sure
	a) Courtesy	( )	( )	( )	( )
	b) Accuracy	( )	( )	( )	( )
	c) Speed of Service	( )	( )	( )	( )
	d) Knowledge of job	( )	( )	( )	( )
	e) Helpfulness	( )	( )	( )	( )
4. How would you rate the convenience of hours at your library?		Very Good ( )	Satis-factory ( )	Poor ( )	Not Sure ( )
5. How would you rate the appearance of your library?		Always	Some-times	Seldom	Not Sure
	a) Clean	( )	( )	( )	( )
	b) Orderly	( )	( )	( )	( )
	c) Attractive	( )	( )	( )	( )
6. If applicable at this library how would you rate our		Very Good	Satis-factory	Poor	Not Sure
	a) Reference Service	( )	( )	( )	( )
	b) Book Collection	( )	( )	( )	( )
	c) Periodical Collection	( )	( )	( )	( )
	d) Other Materials Collection	( )	( )	( )	( )
	e) Reading, listening, viewing facilities	( )	( )	( )	( )
7. To further help us in this survey, please check:		Under 25	25-34	35-50	Over 50
	Male ( )	( )	( )	( )	( )
	Female ( )	( )	( )	( )	( )

Fig. 1 Patron Satisfaction Survey *(cont.)*

8. What other services do you use at this branch?

Interlibrary loan ( )
Children's Programs ( )
Adult Programs ( )

Other:_____

We welcome your suggestions on specific areas where we may improve out services and any other comments you may have:_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Name_____ Address_____

(Name and address are optional)

Source: Chase Manhatten Bank as reproduced in McGuire, The Consumer Affairs Department, p. 49.

Modified to fit library context by author.

Fig. 1. Patron Satisfaction Survey

standards are established; (3) standards are tested to determine their cost sensitivity; (4) standards are implemented; (5) a reporting system is developed; (6) service is evaluated on a regular, continuing basis; and (7) standards and programs are periodically reviewed.[28] Some authorities organize public service into three stages: pretransaction; the transaction; and post-transaction.[29] In the narrow view, complaint handling is a post-transaction activity. In the broader view, complaint prevention and handling involve all three stages. A public service unit is usually involved in: (1) handling, resolving, and evaluating complaints; (2) developing and

HELP US

Your suggestions and comments will help us serve you better. Please tell us about the things you like at the library and about the things you feel could be improved. Also, please fill out our Report Card by grading us in each of the specified areas.

Date:_____

Library Branch:_____

Dear Librarian:*_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

* Or personal name of the Head Librarian

A - Excellent
B - Very Good
C - Good
D - Needs Improvement
F - You've Failed Me Completely

Item Graded	Grade
Employee Competence	
Employee Courtesy	
Library Attractiveness & Cleanliness	
Overall Service	
Book Collection	
Periodical Collection	
Reference Collection and Services	
Children's Collection and Services	
Audio-Visual Collections and Services	
Other	

Source: " 'Housecalls' Provide Rx for Serious Shopper Complaints," Supermarketing, 34 (March, 1979), p. 8.

Fig. 2. Report Card

disseminating better information on how to select and use products and services; and (3) serving as a patron advocate and consultant within the organization.[30] Some authorities suggest that public service and complaint handling will not be treated with appropriate concern until there is an effective third-party, grievance-solving mechanism.[31] Customer service, then, goes beyond reacting to complaints; it is the process of establishing appropriate standards and performance, and initiating corrective action to

insure that service is up to standard. There may be a substantial gap between the actual service, the staff's perception of the service, and the patron's perception of the service. The customer service program should bring these together.[32]

THE POLICY STATEMENT

Because of the importance of complaint handling and the fact that complaints, especially those involving publicly funded institutions, can have legal implications, it is important that a complaint handling policy be created. While the format and specific intellectual content will vary according to institutional needs and requirements, certain elements should be common to all such policies. For example, all policies should be founded on these basic principles.

1. Complaints are inevitable. No one should be surprised when a complaint is made. A library serving the public should expect to receive complaints.
2. Receipt of a complaint is not an indication of error or failure. Not all complaints are well-founded. Not all complaints are serious ones. When patrons feel comfortable about complaining, the library is developing a good relationship with its users. In fact, the absence of complaints is much more likely to indicate error or failure.
3. Libraries make errors from time to time. No institution can claim that its services are perfect. Given the complex and labor-intensive nature of the library and the service that it provides, as well as the ambiguity surrounding many patron wants and needs, it is likely that errors will occur. Thus a mechanism is needed to identify and correct errors as quickly and as painlessly as possible.
4. Patrons have a right to complain. While this is particularly true for publicly funded libraries, all libraries exist to meet the needs of users. Each user has the right to express dissatisfaction to an appropriate member of the library staff.
5. Patron complaints should be handled in a professional manner. They should be treated seriously, courteously and with concern for the patron's point of view. A substantial written response should be completed in a reasonable time.
6. Due process is an integral part of complaint handling. While each complaint is treated seriously, it remains an allegation until evidence is presented to support or reject the complaint. Fact-finding requires a reasonable amount of time and a specific mechanism to locate and

evaluate the facts in question. Library managers and members of library governing boards must recognize that sound decisions cannot be made until after the fact-finding process is complete. Specifically, the policy should prohibit the "end run" where a complaint is made directly to a member of a governing board or to the librarian's superior who then makes an immediate, and perhaps arbitrary, decision. No librarian should be placed in the position of being unprofessional by accepting such a decision or being insubordinate when refusing to accept a decision not based on fact-finding. The librarian must convince those to whom he reports of the need for due process, emphasizing that due process will mitigate against difficult, emotion-laden encounters with constituents.

7. Appeal of a complaint-handling decision should be possible. Capricious appeals need not be encouraged, but users should know that an appeal process exists and that it may be followed where circumstances make it appropriate. The initial or lower level remedy should be exhausted first, but appeal should extend to the final governance level.

The incorporation of these elements into the policy statement provides an appropriate intellectual context and emphasizes the importance of complaint handling in the library. In addition to principles, the policy should also include sections which: identify responsibility for receiving, processing and resolving complaints; define authority to settle complaints; establish appropriate procedures; and establish follow-up procedures.[33]

A complaint-handling policy can have useful educational benefits for the library staff, members of the governing board, and members of the community if it is adequately disseminated, explained and discussed. Each member of the library staff who meets the public should have a copy of the policy and should understand what it means and how to use it.

While the document may be prepared by senior library management, policy creation should involve extensive staff interaction. Those who will implement the policy need to be involved. Such involvement may be individual and informal in a smaller library or may be through a more formal committee and representative process in the larger library. An honest exchange of opinion may identify important problems. For example, the staff may represent "coddling" obnoxious or assertive patrons who complain; this resentment may be minimized if staff are involved in the discussion of principles as well as the procedures which implement those procedures. However, there can be many problems with staff implementation. In many libraries, there may be a wide gulf between the director and the clerk at the circulation desk. The clerk may feel threatened by patron

comments or questions, may be full of silent complaint against library management, may feel ignored and abandoned, etc., and yet the desk clerk is the one fielding the complaints. Better communication within the library is a pervasive need. Without communication and understanding from the beginning, the complaint-handling process is not likely to be successful.

THE PROCEDURE

Creating complaint-handling procedures involves several steps. Individuals to be involved in creating the draft document should be identified. Whether or not to have nonlibrary staff participate is also an important question. If due process is a particular concern, for example, a lawyer might participate in the drafting process or react to the draft as a consultant. Community participation might provide a variety of viewpoints and create substantial public relations opportunity.

Procedures must have standing; they must be approved and adopted by library management and also by the library's governing body. The librarian must persuasively explain how the policy and procedures benefit the community and the library. It is usually helpful to circulate discussion drafts to members of the governing board so that there is an opportunity for informal reaction and response. It is best not to submit a document for final approval and adoption unless it is likely to be approved. It might also create serious problems to bring a complaint-handling document to an unprepared board, creating a hostile climate and risking possible rejection.

When the policy and supporting procedures have been adopted, they need to be disseminated. Those to receive either the whole document or a summary will need to be identified. Ordinarily, policy and procedure would be summarized and widely disseminated to the library staff and to the larger community. A news release featuring the policy and its benefits would be beneficial. The documents should be distributed to public service and administrative staff who will apply them, and a more general summary should be presented to all staff members so that they can explain or comment upon them in the library or in the community.

One cannot assume that the complaint-handling policy and procedures will be understood and accepted by the library staff. Library management must ensure that the problem is understood. This is best done through workshops where public service staff participate in a reasonably detailed

review of the policy and the procedure with ample opportunity to ask questions and receive clarification. Sample cases can be used to test staff understanding and to make points more effectively. Feedback should be encouraged. Refinement or modification of the procedures may make them much easier to apply. Understanding should lead to acceptance so that the new policy and procedures are implemented and followed. If those who will apply the policy and procedures help to create them, if there is adequate education and discussion, if it is clear that the library is fully behind the policy and procedure and will monitor compliance, then implementation should be successful.

In some cases, the policy or the procedure may need to be interpreted before being applied to a particular situation. Staff must know where to go for interpretation so that an authoritative decision may be given quickly. Since interpretation modifies policy and procedure in important ways, there must be a mechanism to insure that the same interpretation is subsequently given to the staff as a whole. Problems result when staff members are given different interpretations at different times or if different staff members are given different interpretations.

Finally, there must be overseeing or monitoring to determine how well the policy and procedures work. Senior library managers need to know how complaints are really handled, if the complaint handling program is effective, and how it might be improved.[34] Several variables might be considered in this evaluation.[35] The number of complaints received and the number satisfactorily resolved is an important measure. For example, an airline suggests that flight attendants should receive ten compliments for each complaint.[36] The average amount of time required to resolve a complaint is also useful. Second letters of complaint should be rare. Few letters of complaint should be addressed to the head librarian. Those handling complaints should also receive complimentary letters and comments.

The visibility of the complaint-handling patron satisfaction mechanism needs to be evaluated, perhaps by contacting patrons to see how many are aware of complaint-handling procedures and the library's interest in patron satisfaction. A sample of patrons who have initiated complaints should be contacted to see if the process was accessible, inexpensive in time and trouble, thorough in fact-finding, and clear in communicating findings and decisions. Finally, it is crucial to discover if valid complaints have resulted in changes in policies, procedures, staff, equipment, or whatever was responsible for the complaint in the first place. Interestingly, some for-profit organizations have used unobtrusive evaluation techniques;

they have written letters of complaint and then evaluated responses.[37] This approach, including telephoned complaints, could also be used in the library. When these several steps, listed in table 1, are followed with patience and reflection, the complaint-handling program should be effective.

TABLE 1
STEPS IN THE COMPLAINT HANDLING PROCESS

1.	Complaint voiced
2.	Initial reaction
3.	Formalization of complaint
4.	Receipt of complaint
5.	Initiation of fact finding
6.	Fact finding and decision
7.	Report of fact finding completed
8.	Dissemination of report
9.	Reaction of complainer
10.	Appeal of decision
11.	Consideration and judgment by governing agency
12.	Report of final decision

COMPLAINT RECEIPT AND INITIAL RESPONSE

The process begins (see the steps in table 1) when the complaint is first voiced. Librarians must realize that complaining is a costly activity for patrons.[38] Not only does it require time and energy, but there can be considerable risk to the ego as well. If the library has a policy of soliciting complaints, then the process begins with staff who encourage apparently dissatisfied patrons to initiate a formal complaint so that problem areas can be identified and resolved. Similarly: "As soon as a problem is detected, inform the customer about it, don't wait for the customer to find out about it and complain."[39] Such action will eliminate many complaints and create a climate of patron loyalty.

As Crane suggests, it may take weeks to attract and retain a new patron, but only a minute to lose one.[40] Staff should develop the ability to spot a serious complaint versus a minor query or comment. If possible, it is best to listen to the complaint away from a heavy traffic area so that others do not become involved.[41] Some critical remarks may be resolved by an immediate explanation by the staff member. Staff must know when to explain or respond to a comment and when to refer it to another who is more knowledgeable about the complaint-handling process or about the particulars involved in the complaint.

While the "customer may not always be right..., he invariably thinks he is"; considerable tact and diplomacy may be required.[42] Ideally, the staff member should be approachable, sympathetic, friendly, understanding, patient, and a good listener. Full attention, especially good eye contact, should be given to the patron who should be allowed to fully present his/her concerns. Tactful, helpful questions can help a patron to speak up, release emotions and focus on the issue. Responses should be carefully considered, avoiding emotionally charged or legalistic phrases.

When the complainer has finished, the complaint should be restated in an objective manner.[43] No suggestion or promise involving a likely outcome should be made. Rather, emphasis should be on the need for a fair and careful investigation. Staff should not be defensive or attempt to argue. Explanation as appropriate and the ability to clearly, helpfully tell the patron what to do next is what is required. Anyone who indicates dissatisfaction to a staff member should be extended every courtesy. The quality of staff performance at the initial encounter may determine the success or failure of the process.

How not to respond might also receive attention. Four negative models should be identified and avoided.[44] With the "runaround," the complainer is shunted from person to person without resolution of the complaint. The complainer is simply worn out.[45] No one appears to be responsible, knowledgeable or decisive. Filling out forms and waiting for them to be processed can be another aspect of the runaround or "cooling out" the complainer.[46] In the "silent treatment" the complainer is ignored or the response is brief and irrelevant. "Shout it out" occurs when the staff member reacts emotionally and loudly to the person who makes the complaint. The patron is likely to respond in kind, and the situation goes from bad to worse. In "blame the victim," surely the worst model, the person who makes the complaint is blamed for any errors or problems that may have arisen in the use of the library. Frequently this begins with words and actions that label the complainer. For example: "You're the first person to complain."[47] Librarians who are conscious of how sophisticated and challenging information-seeking can be may encourage a mild form of blame when they dwell on how little patrons know and how often they make simple errors. Recalling that we work in "their" library may induce the empathy needed to avoid this attitude or response.

Public service staff should be encouraged to record dissatisfied comments, especially those that do not become formal complaints. These do not need to be detailed, but they should help management to answer these questions: How often are patrons dissatisfied? Why? How serious is it? This

information could be collected on a library-designed form which would be easy to complete.[48] A form does not need to be completed for each incident (see fig. 3). This is done to ensure that those problems which occur most frequently are identified and classified so that corrective action can be considered. For example, management may wish to consider creating performance standards in areas where problems or complaints are relatively frequent.[49]

Date	Svc Unit	Cause/subject of Dissatisf	Referal	Action Taken
10 Oct	UGL Circ*	Noise in ref. rm/staff talking loudly	N**	Y

*Numerical or alphabetical code could be used instead, for example, Undergraduate circulation might be 2 or U

** N for no and Y for yes

Fig. 3. Complaint Date Collection Form

Depending on the degree to which the initial staff contact resolves the problem and the degree to which the patron wishes to continue, the complaint may reach the next stage and become formal.

TABLE 2
ELEMENTS OF A PATRON COMPLAINT FORM

1. Date
2. Place/unit where form initiated
3. Patron name
4. Patron address
5. Patron phone number
6. Specific subject/cause of complaint
7. Time of dissatisfaction
8. Place of dissatisfaction
9. Desired action
10. Name of staff member who receives form
11. Date received
12. Action taken
13. Final patron response/reaction

FORMALIZATION OF THE COMPLAINT

For many libraries, complaints exist only when they are formalized through receipt of a written form. Thus, this is the crucial stage in complaint handling. A form needs to be created and made available at all public service points. It should be clear, helpful easy to complete, and provide the library manager with the information needed to initiate factfinding.

Creating a suggestion-for-improvment or patron-dissatisfaction form should not be difficult. Elements which might appear on such a form appear in table 2. It is important to check with individuals in the parent organization to see if an appropriate form has already been developed. The form used in the library should be compatible with that used in the parent organization. When the content elements are identified, a draft form can be prepared and pretested at public service points to ensure that it works well. Several books about forms design can be quite helpful once the elements are identified and agreed upon.[50] When pretesting is completed and the form is appropriately refined, it should be distributed to all public service points with a cover memo which indicates its importance and briefly discusses how it should be completed on an element by element basis.

Each staff member who might receive a complaint should attend a brief in-house workshop where the form is explained and its use demonstrated in different situations. Staff who effectively use the form should receive praise. Those who do not should receive additional help so that they understand and accept the importance of formalizing complaints properly.

These steps, no matter how well done, are not likely to make a difference if patrons do not know that complaints are welcome and that the library has a friendly, easy process to identify and remove sources of dissatisfaction. Some librarians are afraid that if patrons know that they can complain, the library will receive too many complaints, even capricious ones. There is some evidence to support this fear. As Best indicates, people learn from and imitate their friends and neighbors.[51] As the process becomes more visible, the library will receive more complaints. Yet more complaints are desired because they provide more useful information about patron satisfaction.

In-house publications are an obvious place to highlight concern with patron satisfaction and to indicate that the library solicits suggestions for improvement. Signs on bulletin boards, especially in high traffic areas, should also be used for this purpose. In situations where patrons might be fearful about expressing dissatisfaction to a staff member, suggestion boxes can be used if these are visible and if the library responds quickly, thoughtfully and visibly. A variety of publicity initiatives may be undertaken depending on the situation and the nature of the community served. Evidence of the library's desire to maximize satisfaction should be visible in the building.

RECEIPT OF THE WRITTEN COMPLAINT

Traditionally, one of the reasons for responding only to a written rather than an oral complaint has been to provide an opportunity for the patron to cool down and look at the problem less emotionally. In some cases, the patron may not wish to take the time to complete the form, or he may find writing difficult.[52] Taking complaints only in writing discriminates against these people. In other cases, the patron may decide while completing the form that she does not wish to turn it in. Since these two categories could account for a substantial number of at least temporarily dissatisfied patrons, some record of these oral complaints should be kept, perhaps using a form similar to the one in figure 3. This is important because the librarian can then compare the number of informal versus formal complaints and gain a more realistic perception of the degree to which dissatis-

faction exists. It is important not to be mislead by merely focusing on the number of formal complaints, since the evidence overwhelmingly indicates that even under the best of circumstances most complaints will be shared only with family and friends.

When the completed form is received, the staff member needs to provide the patron with a brief, clear explanation of what will happen next so that there are shared and realistic expectations. Typically, this explanation would focus on the nature of the fact-finding process and the mode of response. The patron should be given a realistic estimated completion date so that he will know when to expect a response. Regardless of the outcome, the patron who receives a prompt response is more likely to be satisfied.[53] Fuzzy or inaccurate comments at this stage can create ill will and reinforce the opinion already held by some patrons that the fact-finding process is "fixed" or that it is intended to "sit on" the complaint until the patron loses interest. The staff member who receives the form should give no indication of the likely outcome. The form should be signed and dated by the person who receives it. Some libraries would provide the patron with a copy of the completed form at this time. This is a businesslike approach and is important for complaints likely to involve a lengthy fact-finding process.

INITIATION OF FACT FINDING

Typically, complaints would go from a public service staff member to the head of the unit and then to the appropriate senior administrator. A mechanism needs to be established to ensure that the complaint form quickly reaches management. The integrity of the process is undermined when complaints are misplaced or take several days to reach the appropriate individual. Complaints should be expedited and staff should know at all times where the complaint form goes and the importance of getting it there quickly.

The complaint might be classified into such categories as simple, medium, complex, and particularly serious as well as type and place.[54] Classification helps to identify the most appropriate type of response and the complaint priority. For example, a simple complaint frequently made may warrant a response by an individual form letter. Serious complaints may be handled by phone because that is quick, inexpensive and can generate goodwill.

Once the complaint reaches management, a fact finder needs to be assigned. First, a decision needs to be made as to whether or not there

should be an individual fact finder or a fact-finding committee. The individual approach would probably be most efficient. If there was a single fact finder, it would be a library staff member because of the importance of being familiar with library procedures and processes. The committee approach allows for a variety of viewpoints. Having nonlibrary staff on the fact-finding committee can enhance the process because patrons may assume that the outsider will be neutral and perhaps more open to complaints. The community may perceive library fact finders as likely to defend the library automatically. This means that the presence of just one community representative on a fact-finding committee can add credibility and may encourage more patrons to express themselves.

It is also necessary to decide if the individual or committee should be regularly assigned this responsibility so that complaints are automatically routed or whether it would be better to wait until the substance of the complaint is known and then appoint a specialist. While the specialist can offer experience and knowledge, it may be more effective to have a standing committee or an individual with substantial experience in complaint handling itself. This would also quicken the process by eliminating the necessity for management to decide who will gather the evidence. Specialists, for example the circulation librarian in a situation involving an overdue item, can be asked to participate on a consultative basis.

The fact finder can make the decision on the validity of the complaint or make a recommendation to the administrator who makes a decision on the basis of the evidence provided. Typically, fact finding is a staff responsibility so that a recommendation is the likely outcome. Administrative words and actions should clearly communicate a concern for reserving decisions and action until evidence and recommendations are available. Both fact finders and administrators should have shared expectations about the role of each in the complaint handling process.

Fact finders must be individuals who are genuinely interested in ascertaining the facts of the matter. This means that they must be impartial and open to the possibility that the library has made an error. It also means that they must have the time, the energy and the desire to do whatever is required to discover the facts. A quick and dirty pro forma fact finding may result in poor decisions and will soon be known in the community as evidence that the library is not serious about complaint handling.

Management enthusiasm and cooperation are essential. Fact finders are not likely to take their job seriously if they suspect that management is not really interested in the facts. Fact finders may not be able to gather needed

evidence if the library staff is uncooperative because it believes that management doesn't really care. Fact finders may need free time and clerical support. A clear and reasonably specific indication of support needs to be made be management to the library staff and to the fact finders at periodic intervals so that there is no doubt that the fact-finding process remains important. Library staff should also know what files need to be maintained and where they are, what documentation is required, and the length of time that complaint-handling records must be kept.[55]

The fact-finding process will vary according to the nature of the complaint. Fact finding begins with a careful analysis of the written complaint. It must be clearly understood before evidence can be gathered. In some cases, it may be necessary to clarify the complaint by contacting the patron. If, for example, the complaint claims that a staff member was rude, it may be necessary to identify exactly how rudeness was manifested. When the complaint is well understood, the fact finder should know exactly what sort of facts or evidence are needed to validate the complaint. Fact finding involves interviewing people: looking at material, facilities and the like.

It is not enough to stop with findings. The fact finder should go further and discover why what happened, happened. Why was the staff member rude? Rudeness may have resulted from stress resulting from understaffing. It is not enough to know that the patron was right or wrong. Dissatisfaction needs to be eliminated by identifying the likely cause and suggesting how it might be removed. Even when the complaint is unjustified, it is still important to consider why it was made. It may be, for example, that the patron has unrealistic expectations which can be modified by educational and informational initiatives. Fact finding, then, is primarily concerned with identifying and resolving problems.

When evidence has been gathered, it needs to be organized into findings. These should be transformed into conclusions and recommendations for action. Some consideration should be given to establishing precedents. This is not an argument against flexibility or individualized decisions. It is, however, dangerous to make "a significant concession to one...but not to others...."[56] In some situations, the facts may be given to others who will make conclusions and recommendations to the senior administrator. The administrator would review the recommendation and would normally accept it with an endorsement.

Which administrators are to be involved in the decision-making process will depend on the nature of the issues involved and the scope of authority at different levels of management. In a few cases, the administrator might

ask the fact finder for additional information before accepting the report or acting upon it. Failure to agree with the fact finder's recommendations should be rare.

THE FACT-FINDING REPORT

This report is particulary important because it is the record of the process and because it or a summary should be given to the person who made the complaint. This document must meet both internal and external needs. The report contains several elements: the original complaint or an abstract of it; a brief indication of the method used to gather evidence and the people contacted; the findings; conclusions about the validity of the complaint; and recommendations for action which might eliminate such complaints in the future. While the report need not be a moment by moment record of the complaint-handling process, it should be detailed enough to document that process and to indicate that a thorough job was done.

A decision will need to be made on dissemination. The report may be given to the patron with a cover letter from the appropriate administrator which contains the decision and a brief rationale. In cases where the report is lengthy, overly detailed or contains confidential information on personnel, it may be best to produce an abridged report. Since the report should generate action aimed at reducing patron dissatisfaction, it should be shared with appropriate upper- and middle management as well as staff who might be involved in a similar situation. The report should serve as a discussion vehicle to stimulate thoughtful administrative evaluation of policies, procedures, personnel, supervision, and the like. Reports which generalize and focus on problems rather than on a particular individual are most successful in this regard.

The report and cover letter should be given to the patron as soon as possible. Meeting with the patron to explain and discuss the outcome is more likely to create goodwill rather than simply mailing the report. Although sometimes confrontational, this meeting provides an opportunity to inform and educate as well as to demonstrate that the patron's concerns are seriously considered and that appropriate action will be taken to correct this problem.

PATRON RESPONSE AND APPEAL

The meeting with the patron should provide an opportunity for response and interaction. Experience reveals that the complaining patron wants three things: (1) to be believed, (2) a quick response, and (3) a meaningful answer.[57] Tact, diplomacy and understanding of the patron's viewpoint need to be in evidence. The patron should be made comfortable, and the library administrator should present findings and decisions in a clear, professional manner. Argument and accusation must be avoided. There should be no doubt about the facts, the reason behind the library's decision, and actions taken to prevent further problems.

If the administrator meeting with the patron did not make the final decision, he must understand the reasoning behind it so that it can be explained as if it was his own. Blame for a disappointing decision should not be placed on someone else. If an error was made, it should be admitted; there should be no scapegoats.[58] Excuses and vague generalizations must be avoided; remarks should be specific.

It is important not to make promises which cannot be kept. For example, the patron should not be given the impression that possible change is probable change. Unrealistic expectations are likely to cause future problems for the library and create cynicism about the complaint-handling process. The administrator should make clear what can and cannot be done and why. A focus on personalities, either that of the patron or of the staff member involved, must be avoided.

The patron should be given adequate time to consider the report and respond. The administrator should respond to questions and comments as fully and tactfully as possible. As Dingwell says, the administrator must recognize throughout that the most important thing to do "when handling a complaint is not to affix blame but to solve the problem at the least total cost and to the benefit of everybody."[59]

If the patron remains dissatisfied, then he should be informed of the nature of the appeal process. The patron should understand how to initiate an appeal, what happens when, who will hear it, and how long the process usually takes. The patron should be given realistic expectations of what is involved. This means that the administrator must be clear and factual and not attempt to convince the patron that appeals are always unsuccessful or that they are unusually expensive in time and effort.

If an appeal is initiated, it is reasonable to ask the patron to indicate in writing why he does not accept the decision of the administrator. This may be done on a separate sheet of paper and attached to the original report. There may be a space on the original complaint form for an appeal request and rationale. There might be a separate form designed for appeals. The major concern is that the library clearly understand the reason for the appeal. For example, does the patron disagree with the facts as reported in the findings? Does the patron agree with the findings, but disagree with the conclusions? Is the patron primarily concerned with the action which the library will take to prevent future problems? Is the patron concerned with punishing an individual? The more that is known about the reason for the appeal, the easier the task of the individual or the body which must hear the appeal.

The amended report—including the fact-finding report, the administrator's conclusions, decisions, recommendations, the request for appeal and its rationale, and a brief record of the meeting between patron and administrator—should be sent forward as soon as possible. Prompt resolution benefits both the library and the community.

Ordinarily, both the administrator and the patron would appear before the appropriate individual or group to respond to questions and supplement the information previously presented in writing. Where facts are at issue, it may be necessary to have other library staff present. Additional fact finding may be requested. A decision should be reached as soon as possible and that decision should be promptly communicated to both the patron and the library staff, with those involved being informed first. Again, the decision should be helpful to library management in considering improvements. It is important that the decision be communicated so that there are no winners and losers, but a vindication of the process which allows dissatisfied patrons to express themselves and encourages fact finding to validate complaints. Regardless of the validity of the complaint, the process should encourage the development of a library more responsive to the community.

If the appeal process has several steps to it, these activities may be repeated until the appeal reaches the final governance level in the larger organization. Unlike some other consumer complaints, it seems unlikely that a complaint initiated by a library patron would result in intervention by a third party or in litigation. If such intervention should occur, careful, full, fact finding, with attention to due process, should result in a positive outcome for the library and its staff.

THE PROBLEM PATRON

The above procedures and comments should work effectively with typical complaints. Retail experience "has shown that the customer is fundamentally honest and is usually correct in his contention."[60] However, the library may have problem patrons—people who complain frequently and whose complaints are usually without merit. Such individuals can take advantage of the complaint-handling process to gain attention or to attempt to influence policy. Their complaints can demand considerable time and may even threaten the integrity of the complaint-handling process by requiring much time and energy and causing staff to take complaints less seriously, if not negatively. Certainly the complainer-as-enemy perception is enhanced.

For-profit organizations may be able to identify problem customers and then refuse their business.[61] It is doubtful that a library can do this. Some thought needs to be given to what should be done when a problem complainer is identified.

What are the alternatives? One is to ignore the patron. One would be to handle these complaints in a pro forma manner. Another would be to take each complaint at face value and handle each in the normal manner. Finally, the librarian could meet with the patron, attempt to discuss the situation, explain the library's point of view, and indicate what action will be taken and why. Each approach has assets and liabilities which vary from situation to situation. The last approach seems best, but it could be confrontational, unpleasant and perhaps unproductive. Still, there should be value in an honest exchange of views and the patron may benefit from knowing that the library, while soliciting suggestions for improvement, is responsible to the community as a whole and that it is unfair for one individual to monopolize professional time when that is such a scarce resource. Whatever alternative is selected, these questions should be considered: What evidence allows us to identify a problem complainer? Why does this individual complain? Has due process been followed? If political ramifications are likely, how might these be minimized? It is important that the problem complainer, by taking advantage of the complaint-handling process, not be allowed to bring the process into disrepute.

CONCLUSION

Except for complaints about materials, libraries have done little to establish complaint-handling procedures. Why this is so is unclear. To survive,

libraries need to attract and retain patrons, and the creation and implementation of a complaint-handling program is an attractive, necessary method of maximizing user satisfaction and minimizing dissatisfaction. Such a program is inexpensive and requires little but staff time. Complaints can represent a repeated, continuing problem, and ad hoc, informal responses are not likely to be satisfactory. A good complaint-handling process benefits both the community and the library. Such a program would improve staff morale by bringing the staff together, and making them feel more comfortable about their ability to handle complaints effectively and properly. Finally, an effective program will create considerable goodwill toward the library in the community. As Zbytniewski indicates, a complaint is simply an "opportunity to do a better job in the future by finding out what we're doing wrong now."[62]

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